Autonomous Computer-Assisted Language Learning: Turkish Primary School Students' Perceptions of Dyned Software

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Abstract

The research project signifies two concepts which continually play a significant role in education in the ever changing world. On the one hand, there is a significant approach to language learning called learner autonomy; on the other hand, the dramatic increase of interest in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has affected the education generally [1]. Taking these two concepts into account, the research study looks into the Turkish primary school students' perceptions of the role and importance of the teacher in computer-assisted language learning via Dynamic Education (DynEd) software. It also takes into account their independent learning and the effect of computer-based language learning on their experiences via DynEd. In order to obtain data about their views on autonomous computer-assisted language learning, the participants were asked to fill a questionnaire, and some randomly chosen students were interviewed. Also, an interview was conducted with their teacher so as to gain a better understanding of students' behaviour and perceptions. The findings indicate that CALL via DynEd promotes learner autonomy in the Turkish EFL context.

1. Introduction

For over thirty years, technology has been in use in the language classrooms and software applications for CALL have been used for activities such as drill and practice [2]. According to Warschauer [3], language cannot be separated from the computer, and Shetzer and Warschauer [4] argue that 'flexible, autonomous, lifelong learning is essential to success in the age of information'. DynEd is a beneficial language learning program that retains students' attention [5] as the activities proceed while students increase their scores and levels [6]. There have been few studies on this language learning program [see 6, 7], but none has looked at Turkish primary school students' perceptions on the use of DynEd and learning autonomy. Therefore, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What role does the teacher play in computer-assisted language learning via DynEd,? How important is the teacher's presence?
2. Do the students perceive that they have gained confidence as learners, or improved their performance by taking greater control of their learning as a result of the DynEd experience?
3. What are the difficulties and problems the students come across during the DynEd courses?
4. What is the teacher's perception of learner autonomy by means of DynEd?

2. Learner Autonomy and CALL

The development of autonomy in language learning has become 'complex and multifaceted' [8] and also a 'buzzword' in educational areas for over two decades [9]. Benson and Voller [10] stress that 'monolithic definitions of autonomy and independence have proved elusive'. However, Holec [11] defines learner autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'. Autonomous learners accept responsibility for this process and have the ability and knowledge of developing their skills of self-regulated and self-managed learning. According to Benson [12], the teacher role in autonomous language learning contexts is based on the interpretation instruction, and he summarises the teacher roles as a 'facilitator, helper, coordinator, counsellor, consultant, adviser, knower and resource'.

Some studies have looked at CALL and learner autonomy in terms of how they contribute to learning or support each other. The studies [see 13, 14, 15, 16] indicate that technology can improve motivation and language learning if it is integrated into learning environment. However, it seems that there has not been a single view on learner autonomy via CALL as it shows in Bordonaro [17]'s study, which examines the views of advanced second language learners on computers aimed at promoting autonomous learning. On the one hand, the learners use both the computer-based facilities and authentic materials for language learning. On the other hand, it is not apparent that most of the learners take control of their learning and reveal their autonomy in language learning.

3. Method

Participants for this study consisted of 60 Turkish primary school students in Sivas, a city in east-central Turkey. This school was selected because they were implementing DynEd for over a year with the aim of providing a more independent learning environment. Therefore, students had a DynEd experience for a certain time. Also, they had the same teacher for both the DynEd and English courses. The participants were 30 males and 30 females whose age varied from 12 to 13. Their English language proficiency varied from the beginner to intermediate levels. The teacher was a female Turkish tutor and had two years teaching experience.

The questionnaire consisting of 28 statements was designed for students as a quantitative tool with each part eliciting data on students' views in three categories: a) teachers' effective and assistive role in the DynEd environments, b) the effect of DynEd on students' confidence and performance on their learning and c) problems and difficulties they face during the DynEd courses. A Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree) was used to give responses to the items. The researcher draws the questions and design of the questionnaire from the similar questionnaires used in literature [6, 18, 19, 20]. It was administered to 60 participants on 6/4/2011 lasting 30 minutes.

4. Findings and Discussion

Almost all of the participants (95%) accepted that their teacher helped them understand English while engaging in DynEd. 58.2% believed that the teacher provided the meaning of unknown words. The teacher's presence in the DynEd classrooms was considered to have a positive impact on their learning capacity. However, they had varying views on her absence and the preference to be taught by the teacher. 91.6% considered the tutor a helper and facilitator. 73.3% agreed that the teacher should assist them in handling their own learning, but called upon for help. 66.6% did not find it necessary to get help from the teacher for DynEd. Similarly, 76.6% performed the activities without the guidance of the teacher. Also, 59.9% favoured practising on their own. They showed different tendencies to note-taking during the DynED courses without the direction of the teacher. More than two thirds of them were confident to take control of their own learning without any problem and could decide how much time to allocate to each activity. However, only a minority claimed that they did not believe themselves to have the capacity to handle these issues. Also, 86.6% were certain that they had increased their English level via DynEd. Their ability to control their own learning increased in CALL settings which facilitated autonomy. Over two-thirds of the learners agreed that they had gained the ability and capacity to overcome the difficulties in understanding unfamiliar words or statements, learn the language and practice the activities on their own, and improve their language learning. They accredited that the use of DynEd encouraged them to become autonomous and engage in learning. 75% disagreed that having the courses based on CALL had adverse effects on their language learning. The majority of the learners held the same views on the difficulties and problems they came across in the DynEd courses, such as the lack of computers and time spent on these courses, and the ignorance of the administrators to equip them with microphones, or earphones. Although half of them stated that they did not have any problem with the manipulation of the programme in the expected time, others were not sure.

The students stated the need for assistance in comprehending how to learn, and the teacher as a facilitator of language learning. However, they claimed that what they had done so far was done independently. They thought that their English was improved via DynEd and added that:

'When compared with our scores in the previous year, our present scores are better. This situation also motivates us to study harder and try to get better scores in every course. We would prefer to have more DynEd courses.'

According to them, the DynEd courses enhanced them to learn autonomously; so, their performance and confidence were improved, and at that time, they felt not dependent on the teacher to learn anything let alone English. They complained about the limited duration of time spared for DynEd and stated that they would have learned and achieved better if they had been given more time with DynEd. In order to examine the students' autonomous learning in online learning, the teacher was interviewed. She restated that she helped them with some units on some occasions; however, they took control of their learning and decided what to focus on. She described them as active and autonomous learners via DynEd.

CALL via DynED enhanced learner autonomy with the teacher's help. It reveals that learners have a tendency to handle language learning on their own. The DynED courses both increased their

knowledge and helped them feel confident with their learning. The activities in DynEd increased their confidence and performance to develop their language learning. Their awareness to practice even without the teacher's guidance and to be confident to interact with each other demonstrates that there is a significant relation between learner autonomy and CALL. However, the problems and difficulties encountered in DynEd may affect autonomous learning. On a positive note, the teacher corroborated the students' views on DynEd.

All in all, the results in the present study show that students had the capacity and ability to take control of their language learning via DynEd. In other words, CALL learning promoted students' autonomous language learning. Beside these results, it brings to light other issues such as the increase in their motivation via DynEd or raising the learners' awareness to use the online program, which should be looked at in a further study.

5. Conclusion

This paper looks at the relationship between learner autonomy and CALL in the Turkish context. It reveals that DynEd had an important effect on their confidence and performance. Although there are problems and difficulties encountered in DynEd which could be a detrimental to learning, these can be resolved. Overall, there is a strong indication CALL promotes autonomous language learning in the Turkish context.

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